

Spiritual Practice as Environmental Activism in an Australian Ashram

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Abstract

Om Shree Dham is a farm and also an ashram at Cedar Creek in the Hunter Valley, NSW, where ancient Vedic fire practices for purifying and healing the atmosphere are performed regularly by a group of white Australians. The main fire practice is known as Agnihotra and as well as removing the toxic conditions of the atmosphere through the agency of fire, the practice is understood to heal the practitioner. Agnihotra practitioners believe that these practices are our last chance to right the balance on earth before some final ecological cataclysm takes place. At least one member of this group joined because he felt that he was doing more thereby in the cause of environmental activism than he had been doing previously as the Newcastle organizer for Greenpeace. Viswan feels that homa therapy is also pro-active direct action like Greenpeace but of another kind. This is now his preferred form of direction action. This paper, which is based on one of the case studies for my doctorate, looks at Viswan's explanation of these practices and at his reasoning about their efficacy and briefly looks at some implications of his thinking.

A movement based on a vision of impending disaster might be considered apocalyptic and many faith based groups with concerns of impending doom have been studied by means of an apocalyptic framework. (Stewart and Harding 1999) However when the vision of impending environmental doom that is held by a faith community is largely shared by most of the contemporary scientific community then this aspect of what they believe is correspondingly less remarkable. Accordingly the apocalyptic vision of the community has not been given central importance in what follows here. Instead the phenomenon of transition from a politically active path into a faith-based life is highlighted especially as this is understood by the practitioner to be ultimately more deeply efficacious of desired political ends.

It is worth mentioning that in the field work investigations for my doctoral work this transition from living a life based on conventional political activity into one based more on ritual and contemplative practices was not confined to the informant whose views are examined here. My doctoral research (Laudine 2005) looks at approaches taken by diverse groups of contemporary Australians who are concerned about environmental degradation and who are expressing this concern by means of various ritual and performance practices. Despite the fact that many of these practitioners are inspired by different established faith traditions (for example, Hindu, Buddhist, neo-Pagan), their commonly expressed understanding is that by working with ritual and by the corresponding work this entails upon the consciousness of the practitioner they are thereby working more with the 'really real' than they otherwise might. This expression, the 'really real' is one that Geertz (1973) employs in his discussion of the

difference between religious, commonsense, scientific and artistic perspectives. He believes that it is this sense of the 'really real' upon which the religious perspective rests.

It will be seen in what follows here that the emphasis in what Agnihotra practitioners say is not on faith but on scientific validity. Not only Viswan, but other followers of this path, strongly emphasise that what they do is directly efficacious on the well-being of all living things exposed to the practice; plants, animals and humans. As they believe that what they do is providing direct remediation for soil and plants and people and as they believe that this is urgently needed then they are greatly concerned to emphasise that what they do is more science than religion.

Although this paper is based primarily on interviews with one representative of the Australian Agnihotra community these enthusiastic contemporary revivals of ancient Hindu practices are not confined to this country. Agnihotra farms like the one at Cedar Creek have been established worldwide. In Europe, there are centres in Poland, Germany, Spain, Austria and Finland. In South America there are centres in Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. In North America there is a centre in Virginia and one in Maryland.¹ In India there is a centre at Jalgaon, Maharashtra State.

It is no small commitment to live on a Homa Therapy² farm. Firstly, it is a requirement to perform the daily fires of Agnihotra, the primary homa or fire sacrifice, at sunrise and sunset. Then it is recommended that there be a minimum of four hours daily of Om Tryambakam Homa performed by different people taking turns. This must be increased to twenty-four hours a day in full moon and new moon. Many Agnihotra practitioners around the world also begin their day at four in the morning with optional mantra recitation before the sunrise fires. Mantras may also be recited at ten o'clock, twelve noon, three o'clock and at nine o'clock after the evening sunset fire practice. Practitioners who do not live on farms need only perform morning and evening fires and other fires are optional.³

As well as performing the fires, it is a requirement that two huts be built at a Homa Therapy farm. These are only to be used for performing fire practices. In one of these no words may be spoken except the mantras required for performing the fire practices. The essence of these practices is understood as a vibrational transference and transformation of energy, which is activated by means of sound.

As well as all of the devotional activities already listed, plants are grown on these farms for medicinal purposes and for food, and seeds are saved from these plants. It is believed that in the future these farms will become centres for feeding and caring for hundreds of people who will be unable to manage in the outside world because of the extreme degradation of the environment that has been foreseen by Shree Vasant, the Indian leader of this Homa therapy movement.

Viswan thinks that Homa Therapy will avert a planetary crisis. Previously he was the Newcastle organiser for Greenpeace⁴ and although he still believes that they do very good work, he feels that the time is past for working in the confrontational style that they use in order to try to change people's opinions. He believes that what we have to do now is show people that "here is a result—enjoy the food and the

¹ At the Maryland centre, round-the-clock Om Tryambakam Homa has been practiced since 1978.

² Homa Therapy is understood to be the science. Agnihotra is the basic therapy.

³ For more information, see the Agnihotra website www.agnihotra.org/dailyprogram.html.

⁴ King suggests that scholars look for spirituality not only in religious group but also in movements such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace (1996:347).

medicine. It will be our only salvation in the future.”⁵ In this way he feels that homa therapy is also pro-active direct action like Greenpeace but of another kind. He is no longer working with blockades but he is growing vegetables, saving seed and making ready to feed “hundreds and hundreds” of people as well as being ready to provide medical treatment. This is now his preferred form of direct action.

At the time of the interview Viswan and his partner Kevala, along with their son Jayaram were looking after the farm/ashram, Om Shree Dham, while the owners, Lee and Frits Ringma were in India for several months. Viswan explained that it was not an easy thing to come to the life on the farm. Both he and Kevala would prefer to live on the north coast but he says the movement does draw people to give their lives. Viswan has a Christian name but he does not use it anymore. Kevala sometimes uses hers. Viswan explained that he went to a Methodist church until he was about ten but when he was young he could not relate to church culture. He says he has more respect now and is more tolerant since he has come to a spiritual path, which works for him and has given him insights into some of the similar truths in Christianity, which he did not understand before.

At the beginning of our interview Viswan emphasised that the practice of Agnihotra, and of Homa therapies generally, is a science—not a religion. This emphasis on science was pursued throughout the interview. In saying that Agnihotra is not a religion he was saying that it is beyond all religions in that it is not specific to any religion and need not be associated with a religion. He talked about sections of the Koran and Matthew in the modern bible where sunrise and sunset fire sacrifices are mentioned.⁶ This practice, he says, was handed down to *all* humans in ancient times as part of instructions on how to survive on earth.

Those who give their lives to the Homa Therapy practices believe that these are ancient sacrifices, which have been reintroduced now for the good of humanity by an avatar who was born about one hundred years ago. An avatar is understood to be a light being who is beyond the life cycle, that is, someone who has completed their evolution through many, many, rebirths and who has no need to incarnate again, but who chooses to do so for the good of humanity. Goring refers to the “descent of a deity to earth in a visible form” as an avatara and describes it as a Hindu tradition associated with Vishnu (1994:48). The name of this avatar is Shree⁷ Gajanan Maharaj who took on a human form to reintroduce the ancient Vedic homa practices in a pure form. He is said to be a kalki (pollution) avatar who came to earth especially because of the pollution problems humans are now causing. Shree Gajanan Maharaj has now passed on his mission to Shree Vasant.

There was seen to be a need to reintroduce the practices in India in a pure form because, according to the teachings of Shree Vasant, they had gradually become distorted over the years. Because there are already Agnihotra practices performed in India⁸ and because these are linked to cultural traditions now, for example, only Brahmins may perform certain types of fires, then there is some cultural resistance in

⁵ The idea that direct confrontational political action is unworkable is also espoused by other eco-spiritualists. Members of the *Voices of Gaia*, for example, a group of women from northern New South Wales believe that it is more important to work with positive aims than to counter what others are doing. See Laudine 2005:102.

⁶ There are also Tibetan fire practices for purification of the environment. See Laudine 2005:130. In addition, Australian Aborigines still perform burning purification practices. For example, a purification fire is kept burning at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy at Parliament House in Canberra.

⁷ Shree is the standard honorific for 'Sir' or 'Mr'.

⁸ See, for example, studies on Vedic Homa ritual by Frits Staal.

India to taking on the teachings of Shree Gajanan Maharaj.⁹ According to these new teachings, of Shree Gajanan Maharaj, anyone may perform the fires.

Another criticism, by the modern Agnihottrins, of the way fires are performed in India is that they have been elaborated for the sake of ritual expression and this is believed to have diminished their scientific potency. In becoming involved in this re-purification of the Agnihotra rituals, committed Homa therapists are taking part in a stage in the life of the ritual that Tambiah refers to as 'left turning'. He opposes these to the 'right turning' of rituals, characterised by the rituals coming to serve mainly the pragmatic interests of authority (1979:166). In other words, they are taking part in cyclical religious revival and reform albeit offshore from the Indian mainland.

Now the offshore revival has reached the stage where western born Agnihotra practitioners are taking the practice back to India and starting centres for its dissemination. They say this was part of the intention of the Indian teachers in bringing the practice to the west originally so that it should eventually come back to India. Lee and Frits Ringma, the owners of Om Shree Dham, along with their two children, who were in India at the time of writing, were there for this purpose. Anne Godfrey and Bruce Johnson are another couple who owned another Agni farm at Cedar Creek near to Om Shree Dham. They are also now living in India and offering programs at a centre in Tapovan, in northern Maharashtra state in India, where a "unique health resort is being developed". Tapovan is described in the Agnihotra newsletter, *Satsang*, as follows:

Tapovan is special since it is run by westerners following a simple Vedic lifestyle and a disciplined program of Ayurvedic Healing Fires tuned to the biorhythms of Nature. For the first time, comfortable western-style accommodation is offered to people from the west who wish to take advantage of the healing energies available in this holy place. Individual treatments available include the ancient ayurvedic pancha karma, nature cure, individual dietary requirements, hydrotherapy, mud therapy. This is an ancient place of Healing Fires. During the course of time this practice was lost and now it is revived by western people. It is ideal for people wanting to undergo a complete detox program in a pleasant environment seeded by vibrations of Divine Love in the complete faith that their health is in the hands of people professionally trained in the ancient techniques of Ayurveda... Payment by donation to Fivefold Path Mission. (Johnson 2000:7)

Whatever else it might be, this western mission to take something Indian back to India is an interesting example of global complexity in modern beliefs.¹⁰ Apart from making its journey back to India, Agnihotra is spreading elsewhere at a rapid rate. Decisions are made about where centres are needed according to pollution levels and as a need is perceived for help in growing crops. In South America, for example, there is a centre in Peru. Here children are suffering skin and eye problems because of ozone depletion and increased exposure to ultra violet rays. Logging in Brazilian rainforests is another nearby problem. There are also problems with the collapse of plantation crops in Peru because of diseases resistant to agri-chemicals. According to Viswan, the Peruvian government is now encouraging Homa Therapy by subsidising farmers who use the practice on their farms. *Satsang*, the journal of the Homa Therapy movement, cites positive Homa Therapy results, which it is claimed, are

⁹ Winternitz, in Mackenzie Brown, (1986:72) notes a priestly concern to preserve the purity of the Vedas from pollution by not allowing the lower castes to learn the sacred insights in the form of texts.

¹⁰ The story of my New Zealand born sister-in-law's grandparents provides a similar example. They were Cantonese born ethnic Chinese Christians who came to New Zealand as Christian missionaries in order to spread the Christian light in the southern gold fields.

certified by the Department of the Presidency of Peru. The item cites reports from the Chief of Special Projects Alto Huallaga, in the Amazon region of Peru. The following extract is typical of the report which runs to several pages.

The Headquarters of the Zone Leoncio Prado-Padre Abad certifies:

That in the area of alto Huallaga, an organic and ecological technique called HOMA THERAPY is being applied for the implementation of the project "Integrated Management of the Crops of the Region Applying HOMA THERAPY, which is based on the biorhythms of nature and the Science of Pyramidology." The following has been observed in the Plantain and Banana Plantations:

An accelerated rejuvenation of the plants. A great quantity of new, healthy leaves of intense green, shiny colors are present. [Many more changes of this type are cited. For full details see report.] (Lander-Larrota 1999:4)

Viswan claims that the same thing has happened in Chernobyl where tests have been done on the radiation levels before and after using Agnihotra, with findings indicating some neutralising of the radiation, so that now the government has subsidised farmers to take on farming by homa practices.

Another issue of *Satsang* puts forward a challenge for anyone who is interested to find a highly diseased area in which all methods of removing plant disease have failed. They promise volunteers will come to the designated place and show how to eradicate disease. They stipulate that scientific observations such as soil and water analysis should be made by a university or some other qualified authority (Powers 2000:5). Other publications of the Homa Therapy association throw out challenges to science. For example *Homa Therapy—Our Last Chance* (Paranjpe 1989) devotes a whole chapter to suggested experiments that can be set up by scientists to test the powers of the fires. One suggestion, for example, is to test the Agnihotra ash with an oscilloscope.¹¹ (Paranjpe 1989:49) So firmly do they believe this is a science, they feel that if scientists listen to what they are saying the course of history will turn (Paranjpe 1989:66).

While it is recognized by Homa Therapy practitioners that the practices they do are in the form generally described as ritual or ceremonial they prefer not to use this terminology. The reason for this is that they wish to emphasise that what they do has direct efficacy in the material world. They also acknowledge that what they are doing is a spiritual practice but they wish to point to the unity of the spiritual and the material world. The material and spiritual level are understood to be one and the same. This is seen not to be a belief, because "belief is a matter pertaining to the mind", but to be beyond belief, in that it is a recognition of what is. Homa therapists believe that the problems we face now are a result of a too narrow science, which does not recognize this ultimate unity.

In ancient cultures, we used to look at it as ceremony but I think there was more science than we recognized in dances and songs. Where they relied totally on nature there was a respect that spirit and nature are all one. We just see it as separate in the western world.

The Agnihotra fires are made with dried cow dung and when the dung is burning, ghee and rice are added as offerings to the fire. For other fires (Yajnyas), offerings might be ghee, milk or the juice of medicinal herbs. Blood and flesh are never used and it is considered that the fire offerings of flesh and blood such as those mentioned

¹¹ It is believed a healing sound comes from the ash.

in the Old Testament are degenerated Yajnyas (Anon 2001). Presumably this judgement includes the Vedic sacrifices which also involved flesh and blood (cattle).

Part of the way Agnihotra is said to work is by means of the mantra itself. The correct pronunciation of the Sanskrit mantras is held to create a specific vibration, which can cause a desired change in the atmosphere. Extensive training is undertaken to ensure that the pronunciation of the Sanskrit mantras is made with precision. Viswan explained that the sounds of Sanskrit are understood to be important as vibrations more than as a language. This concurs with Staal who says “There is no tradition for the preservation of meaning, a concern regarded as a mere individual pastime. The brahman’s task is nobler: to preserve the sound for posterity, maintain it in its purity” (1979:122).¹²

Another way that homa practices are said to work is because of the sound emitted by the vessel in which the burning ceremony is conducted. The fires are made in copper pyramids and when the fires are burning, these vessels emit a sound. This sound coming from the sacrifice is what is believed to do the healing. Even the ash of the fires is believed to heal. Moreover, the ash is also said to emit a sound. It is said, again, that it is this sound in the ash that heals. “All the other things are there, such as nutrients, vitamins, minerals. *But the key is the sound*. One subtle enough to detect can show this” (Paranjpe 1989:49).

The inverted copper pyramid in which the fires are burned is built in an arrangement of three tiers. The burning of the fire causes each level of the pyramid to emit a different hum, which in combination together is said to cause a particular sound at the correct resonance to result in a vibration travelling twelve kilometres up into the atmosphere. This vibration is believed to reach a level where it makes contact with pranic¹³ forces which are then drawn down by the force of the sonic vibration to the area around where the practice is performed. It is this rain of prana, which causes the healing of both practitioner and environment.

According to ancient science, using Homa fires in the prescribed way, the plants can extract nutrition from about twelve kilometers in space, and the effect goes back to the pyramid. After Agnihotra, at the exact time, there is an aura field around each plant, each tree, every blade of grass—thousands of energy fields. The first effect of Agnihotra goes up about twelve kilometers and the effect rebounds back down to the pyramid. When this energy comes back, it is absorbed by these aura energy fields for as long as the Agnihotra flame burns. We see the result in the form of healthy plants, maximum yield, and produce of superior size, taste and texture. (Powers 2000:6)

Viswan also said that if the performance comes from the heart then the performance works, thereby indicating that the intention or focus of the practitioner is critical to the wider effect. Scholarly explication of the use of the word mantra in the Rigveda claims “the recitation of the product of the inspired mind of the poet is, as to its effect, put on a par with a sacrifice”. Similarly, where the reciter expresses the intention to address a mantra to the god Agni, “where it is said to come from the poet’s heart, the well-known ‘place’ where the intuition is conceived, the supranormal visions are seen, the inspiration is received; it is, moreover, *sutasta*- “well-fashioned”

¹² There is an enormous corpus of material about sound in Hindu thinking. See for example Gonda 1963 especially pages 247, 251-2, 266, 269 and Mackenzie Brown 1986 and Beck 1993.

¹³ Prana is a Hindu term that can be understood on a number of levels. One of the most important ways is as the life force or creative source of energy which is thought to pervade and vibrate through the universe and thus through all things.

(Gonda 1963:251-2). It is also part of the traditions that in order to 'live' and be efficacious a mantra must have been handed down orally from the very first 'seer' who 'saw' it in a suprasensual way and be pronounced by a person who believes in it. It is 'the power of the mind which makes it efficacious' (1963:266).¹⁴

Viswan says that Agnihotra performed at sunrise and sunset sends out a vibration to all of nature around¹⁵ that causes joyous singing especially in the morning. It is said to enhance the dawn chorus. "One of the things I first noticed was the birds would start to sing as soon as we did it within the second as we did the mantra they would sing."¹⁶

It is said that when subject to Agnihotra, plants too become happy and they 'sing'. It is not only birds and plants that are said to benefit however. Nature spirits, in the form of devas, are believed to gather round when the fires are made. It is said practitioners can sometimes perceive these normally invisible spirits at the time of the fire. Viswan told the story of the founding of the homa centre in Poland where the first fires performed were said to be visibly attended by local devas. This type of experience, he says, has nothing to do with beliefs, just with recognition of what is. In a similar way, the particular place chosen for the centre in Poland was verified by the founder Shree Vasant as the correct place because of the resonance left there from ancient Agni Hotra fires made there in time long past.

As all of this change is said to happen with the plant life, bird life and spirit life, so also, changes happen with the person or people performing the ceremony. Viswan explained that when you do Agnihotra, exactly at the second when you do the mantra and introduce the substances to the fire, rice and ghee, then at this second all your energetic bodies are aligned. The four energetic bodies which are aligned with the physical counterpart, namely the etheric, emotional, mental and causal, are said to come into complete alignment, even if only for a few seconds. "Even an alignment for a few seconds brings tremendous energy and your mind energy shifts to joy". It is, he said, the wholeness, integration, alignment which brings the joy. This is caused not just by the energy of the fire or by the concentration of the practitioner but by the sound of the mantra too. A permanent alignment such as this, he explained, is what is meant by enlightenment.

Viswan is describing an experience of getting in touch with the self made of bliss (*ananda*) the innermost self of the fivefold description of levels of the self in the Taittiriya Upanishad.¹⁷ The integrated experience takes him to this centre where the blissful experience is available as an upsurge of joy from the inner being.

What Viswan describes here about joy arising from mindful practice echoes a discussion in relation to Buddhist practice (Laudine 2005:140) where it was found that mindful practice activates that part of the brain associated with positive emotions. Viswan also spoke of a practice whereby if you quiet yourself to hear your heartbeat you will get in touch with joy. (From notes made of conversation before interview.) In his explanation the joy is something inherent, something that will arise if allowed, something that is there if fear, anxiety and busy mind are released.

Viswan then made a digression, looking at what happens in such states as a right-brained activity. He suggested that problems like attention deficit syndrome (ADD)

¹⁴ See also Wood (1972:210) who says that with respect to every mantra there must be intent.

¹⁵ This language is identical to that used by Tilpa Bob Randall, an Aboriginal Australian talking about sound and nature. See Laudine 2005:111.

¹⁶ Again, this comment is similar to those made by Elisabeth Stutchbury, a Buddhist practitioner. See Laudine 2005:136.

¹⁷ Similarly the Ananda Marg movement means literally the 'way of joy'.

and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) can be rectified by means of such compensating right-brained activities which will help to make up for modern over-exposure to left-brained activities such as computer games. In using this left-brained/right-brained terminology, he is using a popular contemporary idiom, which operates as a means of talking about the overemphasis on rational cognitive functions and under-utilisation of intuitive and creative abilities. A couple of points can be made about this. Firstly, recent neuroscience (Goleman 2003:3-13) has determined it is in fact the left frontal lobe, which is associated with positive emotions, which suggests that the modern left/right idiom does not bear too close examination. Secondly, in support of what Viswan says, it is also worth noting that there is some evidence that more creative activities such as composing music, are more likely to induce a feeling of flow than less creative activities such as playing basketball, even though the first might be considered work and the second play (Csikszentmihalyi 1975:180).

He then went on to explain that two things happen when you do a fire for an extended time, firstly, your voice rhythm changes when you go “out of your mind”, into the action of the process that you are doing and secondly, *your body becomes flow*. In the beginning, he said, there is a mind co-ordination on how “this is the right time to do the ghee”. After a while the mind completely switches off and it happens automatically and you know the way you put the ghee in to the fire becomes rhythmical. “You fall into this rhythmical thing as you are saying the mantra and *that is the time joy starts coming, because that is the time you start to feel one with it* and it’s not labour anymore. You can just sit there and it keeps coming.” This is a clear description of the flow experience often referred to in both artistic and religious experiences and it makes a precise statement about the linking of this with the experience of joy. Viswan said this is what is meant by the integration of all the energetic bodies and it is something he thinks of as “connecting with the world soul”.

It might be possible to pursue some of the truth claims made here, and the challenges to science, made by Homa Therapists, to check and validate results they have declared for the practices discussed here. This may be interesting but is well outside the scope of this paper. It is evident, not only from the conversation with Viswan, but also from the homa therapy literature that the science claims are a strong element in how the movement both sees itself and presents itself. It is worth noting that whilst the practices are said to be ancient, the perception of them as also scientific, is bound to appeal to westerners, whose basis for validity is still informed by science no matter how disillusioned with the status quo.

If the essence of the experience for the practitioner is one of joyful relationship and if the practical activities of the Homa Therapy members are directed towards improving land and water and growing healthy food then their focus would seem hard to fault. Some environmentalists would however, see Viswan’s new stance as abandoning the problem.

Whatever the efficacy of these practices for the world of nature, it can be said that the choice Viswan has made represents a fundamental shift, from believing that the way to make a difference is by changing others, into believing that the way to make a difference is by first changing the self. By asserting the primacy of the work that the practitioner does on the consciousness of the self, Viswan has moved into an area that is neither mainstream religion nor yet mainstream science – despite some claims that this is where science is heading. See Davies (2007:26) and Chown (2007).

The question of science is an interesting one for green spirituality. A fairly recent study by Bron Taylor suggests that the science drawn upon for contemporary green spirituality is increasingly, although not exclusively, orthodox, that is, congruent with

prevailing scientific views (2001:234). This contrasts with an earlier study by Colin Campbell who found that spirituality in the cultic milieu is grounded in 'unorthodox science' (1972:122).¹⁸

All of this implies that for some seekers today, faith in a new spiritual philosophy does not displace prior faith in science, but instead must be added onto this earlier faith. It also implies that those who wish to meet these two claims are likely to find themselves in a sphere of spiritual practice more usually associated with mysticism than with mainstream religious practice.

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¹⁸ As practitioners of green spirituality are becoming more scientific so also are more scientists writing about the feelings of awe and reverence for nature which are like those gained by green activists in direct experiences with nature. Taylor cites a book by the University of Washington biologist Ursula Goodenough *The Sacred depths of Nature* (1998) as an example of 'spiritual epistemology' (2001:235). He suggests that as more and more scientists express awe and reverence for nature and become involved in earthen spirituality we may be witnessing the emergence of 'scientific paganism'.

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